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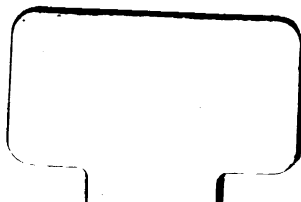


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LETTER

TO

ANDREWS NORTON,

ON MIRACLES

AS THE FOUNDATION OF RELIGIOUS FAITH.

73. 7. 1840

BOSTON:

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LETTER.

REVEREND SIR,

I have read with care and edification, the different pamphlets which go to make up the controversy now pending between yourself and the Reverend George Ripley, touching the true foundation of Religious Faith.

In recalling your attention to some paragraphs of your "Discourse on the latest Form of Infidelity," with which that controversy began, I wish the character in which I address you to be distinctly understood.

I do not present myself to your notice either as a dogmatist, or a mystic, a naturalist, or a pietist, a believer, or an unbeliever; but simply in the character of a rational man,—a rational man not in the German, but the English sense.

You have undertaken to strip Religion of the transcendental and supernatural character which

it has ever borne ; to reduce it to the rank of a natural, historical science ; to place it at the head of the natural sciences ; virtually to assert that it includes them all, or at least, that it well might supercede them all.

It is remarkable indeed, after the philosophers of the last three centuries, at the cost of such dreadful struggles, and through such terrible sufferings and persecutions, had vindicated to themselves, against the usurpations of popes, and bishops, and councils, and clergy, the sole and exclusive possession of the field of natural science, including material nature, and man in all his human relations,—it is remarkable indeed I say, to see a new attempt made, at this late day, under cover of what you choose to call Rational Christianity, to set up the bare text of the Scriptures as the sole source of all useful knowledge, and the science of scriptural interpretation as the only science worthy to be cultivated.

In the name of Galileo, of Bacon, of Grotius, of Newton, of Locke, of Bentham, and of all their followers and disciples, I protest against this new piece of clerical arrogance and pretension ; and not content with protesting, I intend to point out its futility and its danger.

The first passage of your “Discourse,” to

which I would particularly call your attention, is the following.*

—"But we may have a deeper sense of the value of our faith, if we look abroad on the present state of the world, and see, all around, the waves heaving and the tempest rising. Every where is instability and uncertainty. But from the blind conflict between men, exasperated and degraded by injustice and suffering, and men corrupted and hardened by the abuse of power, from the mutual outrages of angry political parties, in which the most unprincipled and violent become the leaders, from the fierce collision of mere earthly passions and cravings, whatever changes may result, *no good is to be hoped. All improvement in the civilized world, all advance in human happiness, is identified with the spread of Christian principles, of Christian truth, of that FAITH, RESTING ON REASON*, which connects man with God, makes him feel that the good of others is his personal good, assures him of a future life of retribution, and, by revealing his immortality, calms his passions."

The most remarkable part of this passage, I have taken the liberty to put into Italics. When you speak of a "faith resting on reason," I

* Discourse, pp. 35, 36.

suppose you to use the word Reason, in its common, English sense, as synonymous with the understanding. You are aware that the modern German writers on metaphysics and theology, have given to the word Reason or its German equivalent, a new sense ; for while they ascribe to what they denominate the lower faculty of the understanding, all those operations of the mind, which, in English books, are ordinarily described as operations of reason, they use the word Reason or its German equivalent, to signify a certain alleged intuitive capacity of perceiving transcendental truth, a kind of internal sense, a faculty in short, which Locke, whether rightly or wrongly, confounded with the imagination.

It is not, I apprehend, in this German sense, that you use the word Reason. It would be inconsistent with your system, and all the other parts of your Discourse. If I understand you aright, you rest the foundation of Religious faith, that is to say, the evidence of Religious truths, upon sensible facts, facts that is, perceived by the senses, or discovered by reflection,—the same foundation upon which rest Astronomy, Chemistry, Mechanics, Legislation, Politics, Political Economy, Ethics, and the other physical and moral sciences.

You hold, if I have not totally misapprehended

the whole drift of your doctrine, that it is only by the exercise of the understanding in the investigation of certain specific facts, that we can ever arrive at any firm conviction of the truths of Religion. In fact, you make the truths of Religion, a mere civil question of the credibility of witnesses. It is impossible, in your view, that we should have any personal knowledge of the supernatural, the invisible, the future. Certain persons, however, endowed with peculiar powers and supernaturally enlightened, have, in former times, had that communication, and have recorded the results of it in the Old and New Testaments. The only questions for us to settle are,—First, are those books, or parts of them, and what parts, the productions of inspired and supernaturally enlightened authors?—Second, what is it, in point of fact, which those authors teach?

Notwithstanding however, your express declaration, that we can pretend to no assurance of the facts upon which Religion is founded “except that derived from the testimony of God, from the Christian revelation,”* you do seem to admit in the second note to your Discourse,† that possibly the facts upon which the “assurance

* Discourse, p. 35.

† Discourse, note II. p. 52.

of a Christian rests," might have been discovered by some process of mere human research; and if I have not altogether mistaken the general character of your Theological writings, however ready you may be to call in the aid of inspired witnesses to supply, by their testimony, the weakness or uncertainty of the human understanding,—you by no means receive the testimony of those witnesses with any very implicit submission. You subject their testimony to the same sort of scrutiny which uninspired witnesses would be obliged to undergo; and if, on any points, their testimony seems to conflict with the dictates of your understanding, you either deny that such portions are duly authenticated as parts of the inspired testimony, or that resource failing, you stoutly maintain that the witnesses, notwithstanding their inspiration, are still liable to mistakes, and in many things, reflect only the errors and prejudices of their age. Here seems to be an inconsistency in your system, which I merely suggest, but upon which it is not my present purpose to dwell.

Summing up your doctrine the best I can, it seems to be this. Religion consists in knowledge, which knowledge leads to certain feelings, called Religious feelings.* This Religious knowledge

* Discourse, note 1. p. 50.

is only to be attained by a critical study of the Greek and Hebrew scriptures; books very difficult to be understood, very liable to be misinterpreted, and which in fact, have been interpreted to your satisfaction by nobody except yourself. As for those of us, who happen not to be skilled in Greek and Hebrew; not to understand the true principles of distinguishing the authentic from the apocryphal portions of Scripture; not to possess the secret of discriminating what in the authentic scriptures, is revealed truth, and what is only a re-statement of Jewish ignorance and prejudices; all of us thus situated, have nothing to do, but to look up for "testimony" to you, "our instructor;" and meekly and faithfully to receive your words, under an awful sense of the "responsibility" we should incur, did we dare, with our small means of knowledge, to suggest a difference or a doubt, or to attempt to exercise any influence upon the opinions of others. Indeed, the rule you lay down as to the propriety of giving publicity to opinions, must condemn all the world to perpetual silence, with the exception of those few privileged individuals, like yourself, who are so lucky as to possess the gift of infallibility.*

* See Discourse, note II, p. 60 and 61, a most extraordinary passage.

To those unacquainted with Ecclesiastical history, such claims, on the part of a single individual, to control the opinions of all mankind upon a subject which, as you say, is the only hope of humanity, will be apt to appear somewhat extravagant.

Had this claim, however, been confined to mere matters of theological opinion, or had you claimed for those opinions only the power of affording, "such consolation and support as the heart needs amid the deprivations and sufferings of life,"* I should not have thought it necessary to trouble you with this letter.

But you go much further. You declare that amid the instability and uncertainty of the age, from the conflict of passions and opinions now going on, *NOTHING is to be hoped*; and "*that ALL improvement in the civilized world, ALL advance in human happiness, is identified with the spread of christian principles, of christian truth, of faith resting on reason,*"—that is to say, on your reason;—with such a system of religious belief, as you may choose to deduce from the scriptures, and to pronounce *ex cathedra*, a Rational Faith.

Every thing, you would have us believe, except

* Discourse, p. 35.

within the serene precinct of your papal jurisdiction, is instability and uncertainty. Amid the political and moral shocks of the times, amid the fierce collisions of earthly passions and cravings, the human understanding is incapable of distinguishing true from false, or bad from good. Amid the contentions of opposite opinions, and the "mutual outrages" of hostile parties, the "blind conflict" between the oppressed and oppressors, the attempt to unravel the tangled skein of human life, to discover wherein consists the difference between social good and social evil, you pronounce to be vain. No good is to be hoped from it. The human understanding has enabled us to measure the earth, to ascertain the distance of the sun, to trace the planets in their orbits, to decompose the atmosphere we breathe, to resolve material substances into their original elements,—it has enabled us, amid the "blind conflict" of life and death carried on perpetually in the material world, to trace out order, system, the great laws of nature. But to understand our social relations to each other ; to discover any new political or moral means of advancing happiness and diminishing sorrow ; to be able, by the calm light of an observant philosophy, to find out the springs of human action, and to learn how to control and balance them for the good

of mankind ; to carry onward civilization ; to advance human happiness a single step ;—this, by any study of the actual phenomena of society, you pronounce to be hopeless. Such is your doctrine,—and in the name of all the philosophers of the last three centuries, those men who contributed so much to advance the limits of human knowledge, to root out ridiculous and dangerous errors, and to extend the means of human happiness, I here protest against it, and pronounce it false. But for those very philosophers, you might at this moment, under the ancient laws of this Commonwealth, stand screaming and bleeding, your tongue bored through with a red hot iron, for presuming to entertain and to promulgate heretical opinions ; you might be swinging on a gibbet hung as a witch ! It was not your learned commentators, your profound theologians, who exposed the absurdity of punishing men for their opinions, or who exploded the horrible errors of witchcraft. It was Bayle, it was Locke, it was Leibnitz, it was Voltaire, who vindicated the rights of humanity, and who dissipated a frightful and dangerous superstition, in spite of the theologians and commentators, with their Mosaic law against idolators, and their witch of Endor, who formed the last rear-guard of those exploded opinions. It was

only by the light of reason, which those philosophers kindled, that you and the commentators have been enabled to discover that the Bible does not authorize death either for heresy or witchcraft; and by what light is it, if not by a taper kindled at their torch, that you have learned to reject the high mystery of the trinity, the immaculate conception, total depravity, and many other principal tenets of the ancient Christian faith?

When you declare that all improvement in the civilized world, all advance in human happiness, is identified with the spread of Christian principles, of Christian truth, of a "faith resting on reason," I cannot understand you otherwise than as asserting, that the advancement of human happiness, and the improvement of the civilized world, is identified with the spread of Unitarian christianity of the Cambridge school, and that the only way to attain a true knowledge beneficial to mankind, is, to study the Gospels, with your commentary.

I do not know indeed that you intend to go so far, as to bring back the times when Galileo was imprisoned in the dungeons of the inquisition, because he chose to learn astronomy from the stars, and not from the books of Moses. I do not know whether you intend to join hands with

the reverend and learned Moses Stuart of Andover, and to subject to excommunication as heretics and infidels, all who hold to any other geology, than that which is taught in the first chapter of Genesis. Perhaps so far as regards what are commonly called the physical sciences, in spite of your sweeping assertion to the contrary, you may be willing to admit that some advances may yet be made by the help of experiment and observation ; and possibly too, that such advances may contribute something to human happiness, and to civilized improvement. As to the moral sciences, I must be permitted to observe that if politics, if legislation, if the administration of justice, if the distribution of wealth, if the whole great art of advancing human happiness by moral means, is to remain dependent upon the true interpretation of the sacred books, to judge the future by the past, the hope of the world is but small. Amid the "blind conflict" of domineering ignorance on the one hand, and half perceived truth on the other, amid the "mutual outrages" of angry controversialists, and hostile sects, "in which the most unprincipled and violent become the leaders," from the "fierce collision of earthly passions and cravings," which theological controversies too often present, "whatever changes may result, little good, I fear, is to be hoped."

What more mortifying than to look back upon the vast amount of human energy and labor, of paper and of ink, spent and wasted by theological disputants? Commentators upon commentators crowd and oppress the shelves of our libraries. What are they all worth? What substantial contribution, in their character of commentators, have they all together, ever made to human knowledge or to human happiness?

Your doctrine is, that Religion is founded upon knowledge derived, and derived only, from the critical study and rational interpretation of the sacred books. This knowledge thus derived, leads as you say, to certain feelings, which not only afford "consolation and support to the heart" but are essential to all improvement in the civilized world, all advance in human happiness. Had you stopped short with "consolations to the heart," I should not have complained; but to go on as you do, and to lay claim to "all improvement in the civilized world, all advance in human happiness," is only to revive the old dogma of the schoolmen, according to which Religion includes all knowledge,—a disastrous and fatal doctrine, which, for centuries, kept christendom in darkness, which it has cost all the efforts of all the philosophers to explode, and which, in our day seemed to be laid quietly asleep, till it is suddenly

revived under the disguise of a so called Rational Christianity.

The doctrine held by your opponents, in the controversy you have raised concerning the foundation of Religious faith, if not more true, is certainly more modest, and much more coincident with the existing state of opinions. The theologians of the new German Rational school, whom you take it upon yourself so superciliously to excommunicate from the Christian communion, do not place Religion as you do, among the natural sciences, nor yet do they suppose, with the old theologians, that the perception of Religious truth takes place only by a special interposition of the deity, a particular communication to each individual mind. So far from maintaining that Religious knowledge is "the source of all improvements in the civilized world, all advances in human happiness," so far from making the study of the sacred writings the chief occupation of the understanding, they declare and zealously maintain, that the understanding has nothing to do with Religion, or at least that so far as the understanding is at all exercised upon it, the results are nothing more than mere facts of psychology. Religion, in its true and vital sense, is a matter of feeling, which feeling leads to knowledge. This is the reverse

of your process, according to which Religious feelings cannot exist, unless preceded by Religious knowledge. Without intending to adopt or to defend those views which I am now explaining, I must yet be permitted to observe, that though knowledge and feeling may perhaps succeed each other in an indefinite succession, yet in the natural psychological order, contrary to your supposition, feeling always preceeds knowledge. Men feel before they know. *Experientia docet.*

The knowledge, however, to which Religious feelings lead, is not according to the new theology, a knowledge in any respect like that which we obtain through the medium of the understanding, by employing the senses, in the observation of outward nature, or the faculty of reflection in observing mental operations. That kind of knowledge, which goes to make up the physical and moral sciences, which together may be called the natural sciences, is confined to our relations to outward material objects, to the operations of the intellect itself, and to our social relations. That is the kind of knowledge which constitutes the exclusive province of the understanding. Religious knowledge, on the other hand, consists in the perception of our relations to infinite nature, and infinite futurity, to that infinite

God in whom we, and all things, live, move, and have our being. This is a sort of knowledge which is not the proper province of the understanding. It is above the understanding ; it is transcendental. It is perceived by a faculty to which has been given the name of self-consciousness, or the transcendental reason, a sort of intuition, a faculty of which Locke and his followers have denied the existence, and which they have explained away as an operation of memory repeating the lessons of childhood, or as mere play of the imagination.

It is obvious at first sight, that this new view of the nature of religious knowledge presents many advantages. It puts a stop, at once and forever, to that furious war between religion and science, which has been waged for eight centuries at such expense of human suffering, ever since the first dawn of reviving letters, down even to the present hour. It enables the philosophers and the theologians to make a partition of the realms of knowledge, as Abraham and Lot shared the pastures of Palestine, and so to live in peace. The theologians give up to the philosophers the whole of the visible world, the material revolutions of nature, the history of man, psychology, morals and politics, that is to say, the whole of what may be called natural, or social knowledge.

Thus yielding up the finite and the limited, which is all that the philosophers ask or claim, the theologians reserve to themselves the exclusive possession of the infinite and the eternal, in the contemplation of which, though altogether beyond the reach of the understanding, the religious mind ever finds its chief pleasure. So far as Religion affords "such consolation and support as the heart needs amid the deprivations and sufferings of life," that is a province which remains to it wholly untouched. That indeed is its principle, and practically considered, it might be said its sole province. It provides, for those to whom carnal life and carnal joys do not suffice, spiritual life and spiritual joys. It deals with man as an individual, and not with men as a body. It confines itself to isolated hearts, which it lightens, cheers, and fills, as it were, with joy and hope transcendent and divine. It renounces all pretensions to regulate opinion, or to interfere with morals, politics, or any of the practical business of life. Religion, according to this view of it, has no more to do with the making of laws, or the settlement of moral questions, than it has with the regulation of watches, or the invention of steam engines. All those are the province of the understanding. "Improvements in the civilized world," or "advances of human

happiness,"—understanding by human happiness, social happiness, the happiness of mankind as a community,—are wholly out of its sphere. It discovers nothing which can be transmitted, in the shape of science, from one person to another. Religious knowledge is a sort of knowledge which every one must attain for himself, or not attain at all. *Poeta nascitur non fit* ; and the religious man like the poet, is born so, not made so. "Verily, verily," said Christ to Nicodemus, "except a man be *born of the spirit*, he cannot enter the kingdom of God." Religious knowledge cannot be communicated like natural knowledge. The happiness which it advances, is not the happiness of the human race considered as a whole, it is not the happiness of masses, it is the happiness of him in whose heart it triumphs, and whom it fills with a joy rather divine than human. It is the life of God in the soul of man.

Religion is thus withdrawn from those busy scenes of human life in which it has heretofore played so conspicuous, but at the same time, so doubtful, if not so disastrous a part. It sits no longer in the high seats of the synagogue, dictating what men shall believe and how they shall act. It is no longer arrayed in purple robes with a triple crown on its head, treading kings under foot, and contending with carnal weapons

for an earthly heritage. Its kingdom is not of this world. It is seen no longer with sleek hair, collarless coat, and a certain hypocritical gravity of demeanor, taking sly advantage of the unwary confidence which its seeming sincerity had inspired. It does not present itself with a harsh and austere aspect, clothed in sackcloth, with a skull and cross bones in one hand, and a scourge of flagellation in the other, frowning upon the sports and vivacity of youth, and accursing all indulgence in the pleasures of sense, as though such indulgence were a defilement and a crime. It does not convert itself into a sour and saturnine spy upon the conduct of others, seeking to palm off the promptings of envy and malice as the fruits of superior enlightenment and love. It does not appear as a fat, sleek clergyman, well fed and well housed, who knows Greek, and who despises mankind. It presents itself in no external shape, neither as a bishop, an inquisitor, a monk, a quaker, a methodist, a jesuit, a church member. It eschews all external forms. It dwells within, and rules and reigns there, and there only.

When it is said that Religion has nothing to do with morals, the partisans of this doctrine ought not to be understood as maintaining that Religion has no influence on the moral conduct of men.

Far otherwise. The influence however which it exerts, is an influence not upon moral discernment, but simply upon conduct. It does not undertake to decide what actions ought to be performed, and what ought not to be performed, what actions are moral, and what are immoral, for that is the province of the understanding; but it exercises a powerful influence over the conduct, by calming, suppressing, or as it were, to a great extent, displacing those passions and appetites, which chiefly lead men into moral temptations. Instead of merely teaching men what is right, it leads them to act rightly almost without knowing it, or thinking of it, much less, making a parade of it.

Such is a very slight and imperfect sketch of that new view of the foundation, nature, and province of Religious knowledge, for daring to entertain which, in some very limited extent, you have seen fit to denounce some of the most learned and exemplary of your Christian brethren, as hypocrites and infidels, who ought for very shame's sake to quit their pulpits, and avow themselves atheists.

The doctrine, however, that Religious knowledge is not a kind of knowledge perceptible by the understanding, is, and always has been, a doctrine of the Christian church. It has been held,

and still is held, by all sects which pretend to call themselves Christians—the Socinians alone excepted,—that the saving and sanctifying faith of the Gospel, is something altogether independent of the understanding, and above it. Most sects have held, and still hold, that this sanctifying faith is something communicated to the soul in a miraculous way, by a special act of divine power, in each individual case. The theologians of the new school, dispense with these particular individual interferences of the deity. They dispense with the special miracle in each particular case, and ascribe the perception of divine truth to a native capacity of the human mind, separate and distinct from the understanding, and as they say above it, a capacity no doubt derived from the deity and immediately dependant upon him, but not in that particular, distinguishable from the other mental capacities.

You are pleased to scoff at this supposed power above the understanding, of discerning spiritual truth, “as existing, if it exists at all, in undefined and unintelligible feelings, having reference perhaps to certain imaginations, the result of impressions communicated in childhood, or produced by the visible signs of religious belief existing around us, or awakened by the beautiful and magnificent spectacles which nature

presents.”* This method of speaking would lead to the belief that your experience of personal religion must be very limited, and that you have no true notion of what piety consists in. This is somewhat remarkable for one who has made Religion a study. I have devoted all my time and thoughts either to practical affairs, or to the moral sciences. I do not profess to be versed in spiritual knowledge. Yet no one at all acquainted with the history of the human race, or with the operations of the human mind, can have failed to observe that there is a certain faculty, tendency, or capacity of the human soul, whatever you may choose to call it, a faculty to which, under one aspect of it, the phrenologists have given the name of Reverence, the operation of which is described in all books of devotion, sometimes as inspiring a sort of Religious or holy awe, sometimes as depressing the mind into the lowest depths of misery and despair, and then again as exalting it to a state of unutterable joy and ecstasy. It is in the perception and the indulgence of this kind of feeling, that piety consists. The lives of all the saints, catholic and protestant, are, to a great extent, made up of it. You speak of this kind of feeling as

* Discourse, note II. p. 53.

undefined and unintelligible. To one who never felt it, I dare say it may be so ; but if you will spare a few moments from the commentators, and bestow them in reading the memoirs of the saints,—let me recommend to your notice so common a book as *the Life of Harriet Newell*—you will be convinced that this feeling is plainly enough defined, at least in some minds. Should you find any difficulty in understanding the description, it might be analogous, I should apprehend, to the difficulty which a blind man experiences, in understanding a description, however intelligible, of the sensations of sight.

When we consider the circumstances under which feelings of piety are usually developed, the propriety of that arrangement by which religion is withdrawn from the business of practical life, becomes still more apparent. Piety seems designed to occupy that part of our existence in which outward objects have lost the power to interest us. Though the rudiments of pious affections exist in all minds, yet in general, so long as men continue surrounded and engrossed by those objects which are properly and exclusively objects of the understanding, so long as they are immersed in affairs or pleasures, or wholly devoted to scientific, critical or literary studies, the affections of piety are apt to lie

dormant. They only begin to develop themselves, when by some great change, some imminent danger, or some overwhelming calamity, our immediate connection with sensible objects is, to a certain extent, destroyed, and the ties which bind us to outward nature, are cracked and severed. With the greater part of men, it is only in hours of solitude and seclusion, of idleness and sorrow, stretched upon the bed of sickness, or in the sick room of a dying friend, that feelings of piety first begin to be developed. When earthly hope fades and disappears, heavenly hope comes to relieve us. These feelings are sometimes lasting; but oftener they are dissipated by the revival of our connection with surrounding objects; and they can only be sustained, if at all, by periodical withdrawals from the influence of everything outward. Hence all devotees have their seasons of secret prayer, and prayer is nothing more than religious meditation resolved into words. All books of devotion insist particularly upon solitude. The prayers of Christ were solitary prayers. "Sit ye here while I go and pray yonder." So when he taught his disciples to pray,—“But thou when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy father which is in secret.” So of fasting and other religious exercises, they

were to be secretly performed. Social and public worship, with whatever religious edification they may in some cases be attended, do yet, in general, degenerate, as among the Jews, into mere vain repetitions, formality, and hypocrisy. Forms and ceremonies, and even seasons of private prayer, may keep up an appearance of piety, but they cannot preserve it alive. With whatever sacred raptures new converts may for a while, enter the church, the conference-room, or the closet, most of them who still continue immersed in the business or pleasures of life, or devoted to literary or scientific pursuits, perceive their piety gradually to die away. They pass from the free covenant of grace under the heavy yoke of the covenant of works. They repeat prayers which they do not feel; they are no longer pious; according to their several tempers, they become skeptics, hypocrites, formalists, or bigots; most commonly the latter. Such were the Pharisees among the Jews; and such, say the new theologians, is the general character of clergymen and church members, men who claim to have all the piety, but who have in fact very little of it.

Scarcely is a single saint to be found, a single person of eminent piety, who is engaged at the same time in the active pursuits of business or

study. "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." Those saints who have made themselves eminent in the carnal world, either became so before they were saints, or else becoming immersed in carnal pursuits, soon lost the odor of sanctity. Truly pious persons are principally to be found among those to whom the world, with its business and its pleasures, is a dead letter; or whose habitual employments are of a nature so purely regular and mechanical, as not to call the understanding into exercise, but to leave the soul at full liberty, disengaged from the material and the finite, to give itself up to the spiritual and the infinite.

When wholly engrossed with sensible objects, every moment filled up with business, pleasures, society or books, the supernatural fades and disappears, and seems to pass away like an idle imagination, the shadow of a dream. Even the most pious often seem to lose it, and tremble with horror on the verge of disbelief. The understanding, however, completely subdued or put to rest, or deprived of the objects upon which it is accustomed to exercise itself, the self-consciousness or transcendental reason of which the Germans speak, or what you would sneeringly call the imagination, comes into play, and presents unseen and supernatural things with the vividness

and reality of sensible objects. This perception of the supernatural is essential to piety, and wherever it exists in a high degree, it destroys all inclination to mingle in the pleasures, the business, the affairs of life, and all taste for science or literature. The mind becomes wholly absorbed in spiritual contemplations. Such are the saints.

Because certain members both of the orthodox and Unitarian churches, have begun to take a view of Religious knowledge like that above slightly and imperfectly sketched, you have undertaken, of your own mere motion, and by virtue of a certain self-assumed infallibility and spiritual domination, to denounce them as *criminals* ;* to heap upon them the odious epithets of infidels and atheists, and to excite against them all the hot rage of that bigoted intolerance which is the hereditary taint and easily besetting sin of this community.

Whether or not their view of the matter does in fact afford a firm foundation for Religious knowledge to rest upon, it is not my present intention to enquire ; but since you so freely accuse them of infidelity and atheism, and of sapping all the foundations of Religion, I propose to show, by way of retort, that the foundation upon

* Discourse, p. 37.

which you, in your turn, attempt to erect the religious edifice, is wholly incapable of sustaining such a superstructure.

You have drawn down Religion from her ancient and as it were natural fastness of continued revelation, by which she had been sheltered for ages. You refuse to place her behind those new ramparts of self consciousness, and a reason above the understanding, which the metaphysicians and theologians of Germany have of late erected to defend her. You expose her, on the open plain, bare and unsheltered, to the sharp daggers of the understanding. Having enticed her down from her heights, and forth from her strong place, you have stripped her of her heavenly armor, and have betrayed her, naked and helpless, into the hands of scorners and of infidels, even as Judas betrayed his Master into the hands of the Roman soldiers.

That you have done it treacherously I do not say, nor insinuate. I would not in this respect, imitate your bad example. To accuse a man of infidelity, in a community like this, is to deliver him over to the persecutions of a fierce and bitter bigotry, it is to condemn him to a sort of social outlawry. If the accusation were just, it would be cruel. But I do not think that in your case it would be just. Nevertheless

the fact is, as I state it. You have betrayed, not the Christian Religion alone, but natural Religion also, into the hands of the skeptics. Upon your principles, as I will show, no reflecting man can have any assurance of the Christian Religion, of the immortality of the soul, or of the existence of a God. The farthest he can go, is, to admit that these are perhaps doubtful questions, and that something plausible, though nothing decisive, may be said in their favor. This I proceed to show.

“Of the facts on which Religion is founded, we can *pretend to no assurance*, except that derived from the testimony of God, from the Christian revelation.”* What those *facts* are, on which Religion is founded, you inform us in another place. “Religious principle and feeling, however important, are necessarily founded on the belief of *certain facts*; of the existence and providence of God, and of man’s immortality.”†

These then are the *facts*, namely, the existence and providence of God, and man’s immortality, upon which Religion is founded; and these too are the facts, “to which we can pretend to no assurance, except that derived from the testimony of God, from the Christian revelation.”

You admit then,—and atheism smiles demurely

* Discourse, p. 35.

† Discourse, note II, p. 52.

to hear it,—that the existence and providence of God and man's immortality depend, for any assurance of their truth, upon the Christian revelation. You observe, it is true,* that possibly a “very wise, enlightened and virtuous heathen” *might* have attained assurance of these facts by a process of reasoning; but you add, that no heathen ever did attain such assurance; and that there is no likelihood that such assurance would ever have been attained to any extent, without the Christian revelation.

Indeed your theory as to the object of Christianity, puts you under constraint in this matter. You allege, that the object of Christianity was, to give men assurance of certain facts, by revelation. But if it were possible for men to attain that assurance in any natural way, Christianity as a revelation was superfluous. And if, owing to the progress of science, or to any other cause, men are *now* able to obtain the knowledge of those facts, without the aid of revelation, then Christianity as a revelation, is now superfluous. Men may have assurance of the facts, on which Religion is founded, and yet hold the Gospels to be a fable; and though you might deny that such men were Christians, you would be obliged to

* Discourse, note II. p. 52.

admit that they were something quite as good. Your theory then, as to the object of Christianity, if you wish to support its dignity or utility as a revelation, drives you to the necessity of maintaining as you do, that "of the facts on which Religion is founded, we can pretend to no assurance, except that derived from the testimony of God, from the Christian Revelation."

Everything then, so far as Religion is concerned, depends upon the truth of the Christian Revelation, and upon our means of knowing it to be true. What are those means?

You assert that miracles afford the only evidence of the truth of a revelation, and are the only means by which we can know it to be true. This doctrine you state upon re-consideration, and after ample time for reflection, in the following terms.* "A Christian believes that Jesus Christ claimed to be a messenger from God to men, commissioned to make known to them, by authority from God, facts of which men's senses had not given them, and apparently never could give them assurance. His firm belief of those facts rests, on his faith in Christ. But why does he believe Christ to have been commissioned by God, to make them known? No one can be

* Remarks upon a late pamphlet, pp. 5 and 6.

less entitled to credence than he who claims to be a special messenger from God without being able to authenticate his claims. He who affirms that he is such a messenger, affirms that God has in him, wrought a miracle ; but this is a miracle of which no other human being can have cognizance, and which is *not to be believed without the most decisive proof*. What then is the proof required? *Manifestly it is the attestation of God to the authority of him whom he has commissioned*. A miracle of which we have no cognizance, can be attested only by miracles of which we have cognizance. If the proposition be clearly stated and understood, that a miraculous revelation can be authenticated only by miracles, I am unable to perceive how it can reasonably be controverted. It is but stating in other words, the proposition that we can have no ground for believing in anything miraculous, where nothing miraculous appears."

The only ground then, in your opinion, which we can possibly have for placing any confidence in one who claims to be a messenger from God, is the fact that he works miracles. The fact of his working miracles is the only evidence we can have of his divine mission, and of the truth of what he undertakes to reveal. Such is your statement.

I now proceed to show that this evidence of miracles, upon which you have rested so heavy a burden, does not, and in its nature, cannot, furnish any proof whatever to the mind of any rational man, of the truth of any alleged revelation; in fact, that it is impossible for us to know, except by the mere declarations of the apparent performer, whether an alleged miracle be a miracle or not. Instead of the miracle sustaining the revelation, faith in the revelation can alone sustain the miracle. Hence you and all who take your grounds, ought to conclude, that there is in fact no satisfactory evidence to be had of the truth of the Christian revelation, or of any other revelation, or of the truth of those facts, to wit, the existence and providence of God, and man's immortality, which, according to your account, the Christian revelation undertakes to establish.

What is a miracle? A miracle is a work performed by special aid and interposition of God. So far however, as the persons are concerned, in whose presence it is performed, it is plainly neither more nor less than a wonderful work, a phrase constantly used in the Christian scriptures as its synonyme. The miracles recorded in the Gospels, to those who saw them, were wonderful works. They consisted in healing the sick by a touch, raising the dead

by a word, in opening the eyes of the blind by anointing them with spittle, in restoring those possessed with devils,—that is, according to the modern interpreters, the insane,—to their right minds. These are wonderful works. We cannot account for them, by any knowledge of nature which we possess. How shall we account for them?

Till within some three centuries past, it was the custom throughout Christendom, and it still is the custom among the ignorant, to account for whatever is unusual, and which cannot be explained by any known law of nature, by ascribing it to supernatural influence. Such works were supposed to be performed by some special supernatural interposition either of God or the Devil; and whosoever performed them was set down, either as a saint or a sorcerer. Whether he should be considered as one or the other, depended principally upon the prejudices or the caprice of the beholders.

In modern times, and among educated men, science has got the better of this credulity. The regularity of the laws of nature has been tested in so many of the great operations of the universe, that it has come to be received as a general principle, that whatever happens, happens in conformity to some general law.

Should a person now-a-days, present himself, who had the power, or the apparent power, of restoring the dead to life by a word, or of opening the eyes of the blind merely by commanding them to open, howsoever much we might be astonished at these remarkable performances, we should not ascribe them to any supernatural power; we should suppose them to occur in conformity to some law of nature hitherto unknown; and instead of resting in a wondering and superstitious ignorance, the whole science of the age would be turned to discover what that law was. Many have believed, in modern times, in the wonders, or as the ancients would have expressed it, in the miracles of Animal Magnetism; but no one thought of ascribing them to a special interposition of the Deity.

Even an inability on the part of the performer of these wonderful works to explain how he performs them, does not lead us, in these times, to ascribe such works to any supernatural agency. Zerah Colburn had a wonderful power of solving arithmetical problems, which he was totally unable to explain. Nobody, however, supposes that Zerah Colburn was inspired.

Even the allegation on the part of the performer of such works, that he performs them by the direct aid of the deity, does not, in these

times, acquire any credit with rational men. It is undeniable that some wonderful cures are performed in ways alleged to be miraculous; it is beyond all question that many camp meetings are attended with effects of a singular and inexplicable kind. But the alleged miraculous nature of these effects does not prevent the educated men of the present day from attributing them to some unknown natural cause.

Suppose that Jo Smith, the Mormon prophet, should actually, before our eyes, raise the dead by a word, and heal the sick by a touch. We should be vastly astonished at such phenomena, but I apprehend that no rational man, would on that account alone, be inclined to receive Jo Smith as a prophet and divine teacher, or to believe every word he chose to utter; especially if we consider the character he is said to bear. Indeed the most strenuous advocates for the miracles of former times, have taken good care to secure themselves against the necessity of giving credit to any modern miracles, by laying it down as a general rule, I know not upon what authority, that the age of miracles is past.

Now without going into any considerations respecting the testimony which we have, as to the actual performance of the wonderful works recorded in the Gospels,—and there are many

serious and weighty objections to be urged as to that matter, the quarter part of which never yet have been urged, much less answered,—no one, I think will undertake to maintain, that the wonderful works recorded in the Gospels, ought to have any greater weight with us, as evidence, than if they were actually performed before our own eyes.

The question then, thus simplified, becomes this. Because a man in my presence, performs a wonderful work, heals the sick, for example, in a sudden and astonishing way, or restores one to life who apparently was dead,—is that a reason in itself, why I must implicitly believe everything he chooses to tell me? All that I actually see, is the wonderful work. He who does it, tells me that he does it by the immediate aid of God, and that God enables him to do it, as a testimony that he is a messenger from God, and that all he says ought to be implicitly believed. But how do I know that he tells the truth? What guarantee do I have, that he does not deceive me? None in the world, except his bare word; none in the world, except those general grounds of confidence which may exist in the case of any other witness, and which are just as strong without the wonderful work, as with it.

Where then is that "attestation of God,"

which, you say, is "the proof required"? It is absolutely wanting. I am compelled to rely wholly upon the testimony of a human witness. If I have reasons for believing that witness when he tells me that the wonderful work he performs, is performed by God's special aid, I have just the same reasons for believing him, and that without any wonderful work at all, when he tells me that the message he delivers, is a message from God. In either case, I am obliged to rely altogether upon his personal veracity.

Thus far we have taken the existence of a God for granted ; but according to your account, that is one of the facts of which we can have no assurance except by revelation. Now what reason can I have, because I see a work done the performance of which transcends my knowledge and experience, to suppose it done by the aid of God, so long as I have no assurance that there is any God? What possible reason can I have for ascribing a wonderful event which has occurred in my presence, to the special interference of a being of whose existence I have no assurance?

A man comes to me and represents himself as a messenger from a certain person, as to the existence of which person I have no assurance. I ask him for the proof of his mission. He performs a wonderful work,—for instance, he

restores my dead child to life. I ask how he did that wonderful work? I did it, he replies, by the aid and power of the person, whose messenger I am. So far from relieving any doubts I might have had, the case now becomes more difficult than before. I was before required to believe two things only; first, the existence of the person sending, secondly, the fact of a message sent. I am now required to believe in addition, two other things, namely, a power to perform wonderful works existing in the person sending, and a transmission of that power to the messenger; and all these things I am required to believe, the last as well as the first, upon the bare assertion of the messenger alone.

A wonderful work affords no testimony that extends beyond itself. All we actually see, is the work alone. There is, to be sure, a seeming connection but which after all may be merely accidental, between that work and a man whom we denominate the performer. But how he performed it, by what power, or virtue he performed it, whether, in fact, he performed it at all, these things are not apparent. If such works are performed or take place by any natural means, by repeated observation of them whenever they are performed or take place, we may at length discover what that natural means is, and how and in what way

they happen. But if the work be in fact supernatural, if it be a deviation from the laws of nature, caused by the special interference of the deity, we never can know it to be so, without another special interference of the deity whereby he communicates that knowledge directly and specially to our particular minds. When the performer of a wonderful work tells us that he does it by the particular aid of God, it is still the attestation of a man merely ; it is the attestation of the messenger himself ; it is not that "attestation of God" which you say is absolutely necessary to "authenticate" a revelation. To give any weight of evidence to the mere wonderful work itself, either independently of, or combined with, the testimony of the performer, is to assume that every wonderful work, which we cannot otherwise account for, must of necessity be explained by supposing a special divine interference. That is a doctrine not likely to find countenance in this inquisitive and intelligent age, and which if it did find countenance, would dispense, at once and forever, with the necessity of any further scientific investigations or inquiries. I have heard of an old man, who, some years ago, was very much shocked at an attempt to explain according to the principles of the science of electricity, what had happened to a house, which

had been struck by lightning. "Nonsense," said the old man, "the lightning goes where God sends it. To explain it otherwise is impious." There are other bigots in the world besides that old man ; nevertheless, his way of viewing matters has gone much out of fashion. Among the educated and intelligent it has ceased to exist.

The conclusion then to which we come, is this. The wonderful works recorded in the Gospels, supposing we believe them to have been actually performed, do not afford, and cannot afford, in themselves, any evidence whatever that the Gospel is a revelation from God. This is a conclusion from which no rational man can escape. A rational man may believe that the Gospel is a revelation from God ; but he must believe it, independently of any belief in the truth of the wonderful works it records. In point of fact, so far from believing the Gospels to contain a revelation because they believe in the performance of the wonderful works therein described, it happens to most rational men, that they believe in the actual performance of the Christian miracles, only because they believe the Gospels to contain a revelation. It is the revelation that supports the miracles, not the miracles that support the revelation.

You see then, to what a miserable state of

spiritual nakedness and destitution you have reduced us, through a vain and impotent attempt to place Christianity at the head of the natural sciences, and to sustain it on the foundation of the understanding alone.

As a supernatural science it may easily be sustained. The supernaturalists of the old school, who believe in miraculous changes directly wrought upon the soul by special acts of the deity, find nothing incredible, or even improbable, in the Christian Revelation. The transcendentalists of the new school, so far at least as doctrine is concerned, find no difficulty with Christianity, because they find it exactly accordant with the innate teachings of what they call self-consciousness, or reason. But you, who pretend to rest Religion on the understanding, rest it, as I have shown, upon a broken reed, a reed not only unable to sustain it, but which pierces to its very heart. To be true to your principles, to abide the decision of the test to which you appeal, you ought to be an infidel, you ought to be an atheist.

“No one can be less entitled to credence than he who claims to be a special messenger from God, *without being able to authenticate his claims*. He who affirms that he is such a messenger, affirms that God has in him wrought a miracle ;

but this is a *miracle of which no other human being can have cognizance, and which is not to be believed without the most decisive proof.* What then is the proof required? *Manifestly it is the attestation of God to the authority of him whom he has commissioned.* A miracle of which we have no cognizance, can be attested *ONLY by a miracle of which we have cognizance."*

Now I have shown,—and if there be any error in my reasoning, I call upon you in the name of truth and humanity, to point it out,—that in case of an alleged miracle, all we have cognizance of, is a wonderful work. Whether that wonderful work was, in fact, a miracle, is a thing of which we have no cognizance. To suppose it a miracle only makes the matter worse. Instead of believing in one special interposition of the deity, without any evidence of it, except the bare assertion of an individual, we are now called upon to believe in two special interpositions of the deity. Each additional supposed divine interposition, instead of adding testimony to the first, only adds to the number of supernatural facts, all dependant upon the personal veracity of a single witness. By the Jewish law, it required the testimony of at least two witnesses to establish the most trivial facts of civil life. Your principle of resting the support

of Religion upon the understanding, drives us to the necessity of believing the whole of it upon the personal veracity of one witness, whose testimony only comes to us at second hand, through channels which you yourself admit to be open to great doubts and suspicions, and to be very much corrupted. To believe upon such testimony, would, according to your own account, be the height of folly. You yourself declare, that the testimony of such a witness is not entitled to credence unless it has "the attestation of God." I have shown that what you have rashly mistaken for the "attestation of God," is, in fact, no attestation whatever. The attestation of God, to the truth of Religion, according to your system, is wanting; and it is not only wanting, but it is necessarily wanting, it cannot possibly be had. The truth of natural facts may be learned by natural means, namely, by the use of the understanding and the faculties subservient to it; but the truth of supernatural facts can be learned only by supernatural means, that is to say, some means other than the understanding and the faculties subservient to it. But if, as you maintain, we have no other means of knowledge except the understanding and its subservient faculties, then to know the supernatural, is utterly beyond our power. I say again, to be consistent, you ought to be an atheist.

The way in which you have been betrayed into the false idea that the performance of wonderful works may be considered as an "attestation of God," and may afford proof to the understanding of the reality of an alleged revelation, is sufficiently obvious. The double sophism by which you have allowed yourself to be entrapped, lies hid in the following sentence. "A miracle of which we have no cognizance, can be attested only by a miracle of which we have cognizance." That is to say, the miracle of a revelation to some one else, of which miracle we have no personal knowledge, can be attested only by another miracle of which we have personal knowledge.

In the first place, this is a very incorrect method of speaking. The proposition, as you have expressed it, is not true. What you ought to have said, was,—a miracle of which we have no cognizance can only be *rendered probable* to our minds, by a miracle of which we have cognizance. If we have personal knowledge that one miracle has been performed, that will incline us to believe, if testimony be offered, in the occurrence of another miracle of which we have no personal knowledge. If we actually know that a certain man has performed a certain wonderful work, by God's special aid, that may make it probable in our

minds, that another wonderful work has also occurred by God's special power, namely, a revelation from God to that man. The miracle of which we have personal knowledge may incline us to place credit in the account of another miracle of which we have no personal knowledge. But one miracle cannot, with any propriety of language, be said to be *proof* of another miracle. At the most, it can only tend to render that other miracle probable, and to prepare our minds for listening with candor to such proof of it as may be offered.

But this is not the main difficulty. "A miracle of which we have no cognizance, can be attested only by a miracle of which we have cognizance." It is evident that you have deceived yourself by the use of the word *miracle*, instead of employing, as I have done, a neuter term, in its place. You have made* some judicious observations on the mistakes into which some German writers have fallen for want of precision in the use of language, and you instance in particular, the German word, *wunder*, which signifies either a miracle, or a "wonderful natural object, or event." According to your account, the double sense of that word has imperceptibly led some

* Remarks on a late pamphlet, pp. 67 and 68.

German writers to confound miracles with natural phenomena. It is easier to see errors in others than to avoid them ourselves. You have fallen into an error of precisely the same kind. Accustomed to use the word miracle, not in its popular sense of a "wonderful work," but in its theological sense, of "a wonderful work performed by immediate assistance from God," you have forgotten, that so far as the persons are concerned before whose eyes such an event takes place, and to whom it is to serve as proof, a miracle is simply a wonderful work. The alleged interference of God, is a thing of which we have no cognizance, and which needs to be proved. All that we have cognizance of, is, the event which has occurred. Whether it be a natural event, or a supernatural event, is what we have no means to know. To us it is simply a wonderful work. We know it to be astonishing and strange, but do not, and cannot know, from the event itself, that it has any supernatural character. Therefore of course it cannot serve, as you have falsely supposed, to prove, or even to render probable, any alleged revelation. The truth is, and on reflection you cannot help seeing it, that the supposed spectator has just as much cognizance of the alleged revelation itself, as he has of the alleged supernatural

character of the wonderful work performed by way of proof. That is to say, he has no cognizance of either. What he has cognizance of, is, in the one case, of a message delivered, and in the other, of a wonderful work done ; but whether the message came from God, or whether the work was done by God's special aid, of neither of those things has he any cognizance. If he believes either of them, he must rely exclusively upon the personal veracity of the alleged divine messenger, or upon some other evidence distinct from the events themselves. The "attestation of God," which you insist to be necessary, is what cannot be had, short of a special and particular revelation to the mind of each individual.

I hope you will not disdain to reply to this letter, out of any such lofty superiority as you affect to exhibit towards the learned and amiable divine who has already published two unanswered letters on the subject of your "Discourse," and the matters of controversy growing out of it. However securely you may sit, perched like the wise man of Lucretius, upon the lofty height of the serene temple built by the wisdom of the wise,

*Despicere unde queas alios, passimque videre
Errare atque viam palantis quarere vite,—*

And however you may exclaim with him—

O miseras hominum menteis ! O pectora cæca !

you ought also with him to recollect that humanity demands some aid at your hand, and that the weakness and the errors of mankind only make more evident the necessity of light.

Having exposed to a total overthrow the faith of so many, in the Christian Revelation, by an attempt to sustain that faith upon the foundation of the understanding alone, a foundation which to all appearance, is not able to sustain it, it does especially become you, as a faithful Christian priest, either to re-edify and restore that foundation, which seems to be tottering, or if you cannot do that, to provide some other. However little weight my reasoning may seem to have to your mind, there are minds upon which it will not fail to make an impression. An answer, and an antidote will be expected, and will be needed.

For my part I have but followed the advice, which you gave at the close of your last pamphlet.* I have not suffered my attention to be withdrawn from the momentous subject of which you treated in your "Discourse," by any of the

* Remarks on a late pamphlet, p. 71.

incidental or irrelevant critical discussions which have grown out of it. That momentous subject, is the very subject discussed in this letter. The question is, do the wonderful works recorded in the Gospels, prove Christianity to be a revelation from God? You maintain that those wonderful works are the only proof which it is possible to have, not of the truth of the Christian Revelation alone, but of the existence of a God, and man's immortality.

I have shown, on the other hand, that those wonderful works, even if they were performed before our very eyes, would, as evidence, be totally useless. If there is any defect in my argument upon that subject, it belongs to you to point it out.

I pause for a reply.



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